DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 188 203 CS 205 629

AUTHOR Grattan, Mary C.; Robbins, Susan P.
TITLE The Writing Center after One Year: Some Myths and Recommendations.
PUB DATE Oct 79
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Virginia Association of Teachers of English (10th, Richmond, VA, October 12-14, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Diagnosis; *Evaluation Criteria; Higher Education; Models; *Skill Centers; *Teacher Workshops; *Writing (Composition); Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Writing across the Curriculum; *Writing Laboratories

ABSTRACT

The year-long development of a community college writing center designed to serve as both site and catalyst for improving students' content area writing is described in terms of the problems encountered during the year and the solutions to those problems. Seven problems are specifically dealt with: (1) the ineffectiveness of the singular use of grammar drills, (2) the variety among teachers in their grading of written assignments, (3) the feeling of inadequacy many teachers had with regard to closely scrutinizing student writing, (4) the limited use of assigned writing, (5) the lack of models provided for different types of required writing, (6) the broad range of student abilities, and (7) the problem of evaluation. The approaches taken to meet the problems are described and include techniques such as having students complete specific grammar exercises that apply to errors found in their own papers, sponsoring faculty workshops that provide forums for discussing the particular problems students and faculty face in writing for their particular field of study, preparing a writing skills chart to diagnose students' writing difficulties in content areas, constructing models for content area writing, and polling multiple sources to evaluate students' writing progress. (AEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED188203

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

THE WRITING CENTER AFTER ONE YEAR:

SOME MYTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mary C. Grattan
Assistant Professor

Susan P. Robbins
Associate Professor

J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College
P.O. Box 12084
Richmond, Virginia 23241

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Mary C. Grattan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 205 629

Even though our Writing Center has accomplished much since its establishment in the summer of 1978, the program has suffered the usual growing pains associated with such non-credit clinics: staffing, materials, scheduling, evaluation, to name a few. However, the theme of the federal AIDP grant through which we are funded has kept us from losing an overall sense of purpose. Our center was designed to serve as a site and a catalyst for improvement of student writing in content area classes throughout the campus. As we on the center's staff experimented our way through this first year (and tried simultaneously to read what others had written about their own clinic experiences), we began to recognize stages of development, "passages," if you will. In analyzing them as they apply to content area writing, we have chosen to present the center's development as a problem-solving process. In the following presentation we will discuss seven of the major problems we encountered and the approaches we have taken to meet those problems. As you will see, some of these problems arose out of myths, or misconceptions of what a Writing Center can do.

1. USE OF GRAMMAR DRILLS

We began our Writing Center with the premise that teaching the individual components of writing will result in the improvement of the students' written performance in class. We were first envisioned as a place for students to come for drills in subject-verb agreement, spelling, sentence structure and the like. To try and live up to this "back-to-basics" approach and still follow the demands of our grant, we designed booklets

of grammar drills directed at specific content areas. For example, we designed a general review of verbs accompanied by different sets of practice exercises for each discipline--social services, humanities, business, and health technology. Thus, a student having trouble writing in sociology would be given the general review plus practice drills based on sociological subject matter. We had limited success with these content-oriented exercises because the concepts mastered by the students in their drills did not transfer appreciably to their written work in class.

The transfer of skills was more apparent when we began to integrate the exercises with one-to-one tutoring on actual assigned papers. That is, we glanced over a student's draft when he first entered the center and noted his most distracting and prevailing error. He then was required to complete a brief set of review drills on that one skill before he began to proofread the draft with us. With the grammatical concept fresh in his mind and his own paper before him, he was generally able to spot his mistakes with very little coaching from us.

2. INVOLVEMENT OF CONTENT AREA FACULTY

Working in the Writing Center taught us that grading of written assignments varies dramatically among content area faculty. (Our concern here is not so much for common grammatical or mechanical errors, or dialect-based features, but for focus, logic of argument, support of thesis, and other larger elements of composition.) We knew this was a problem for which we would never see a perfect solution. It involves academic freedom--a teacher's right to his own set of values for evaluation. However, we have taken several steps in what we feel is the right direction toward greater consistency of writing evaluation. First, through funding from

our AIDP grant, we are sponsoring a faculty workshop for each academic division on the campus. These workshops have as their theme the identification and remediation of reading and writing deficiencies in content area classes. So far as possible, we invite a speaker who is an expert in the field of reading or writing and who has also had some association with the subject field of the particular academic division being addressed. For example, Dr. Lynn Troyka led the workshop for the Social Sciences and Humanities Division. Gail Kettlewell will lead the workshop for the Health Technology Division this fall.

The purpose of these workshops is not to preach, but to provide a forum for discussion of the particular problems students and faculty face in that field of study and the profession for which the student is being prepared. Faculty members learn of ways the reading and writing centers can be a resource for them, and they learn and exchange ideas for reinforcement of good reading and writing skills in their own classes.

As a result of these workshops, we have been approached by teachers in various disciplines who are seeking our help in designing study guides, revising research paper assignments, creating new types of essay tests, and inventing new ways to give students more opportunities to write in class. We are also getting requests from faculty members to sponsor discussion groups on approaches to grading content area papers. Teachers are beginning to ask questions about the value of a split grade for form and content and about ways to criticize a paper so that the student knows how to write a better paper next time.

3. STAFFING THE CENTER

Most content area faculty do not consider themselves experts in writing; therefore, they may feel justified in blaming the English teachers for their students' writing problems, and they may avoid close scrutiny of student papers. Part of our solution to this problem is the verbal skills workshop discussed above. A second approach has also met with some success so far. Facing a critical shortage of tutors one quarter, we appealed to faculty members in the Humanities/Social Sciences Division to donate one or two hours per week in the center. As a result of this request, we had several volunteers representing the fields of history, government, and community services, as well as English. Some of these volunteers entered the center with grave misgivings about their fluency in the jargon of English grammar, but we assured them that a sentence fragment could be described in many different ways and that their way might make more sense to the student than our way. As the quarter wore on, these content area faculty members realized how much they really did know about writing; after all, they had all written a thesis or dissertation and countless papers and essay tests.

As we had expected, the novelty of working in the center has worn off for many of the faculty, but their experience as writing teachers will remain with them and give them more confidence in dealing with writing problems in their own classrooms. We hope to attract instructors from some of the other disciplines this year and perhaps bring in others from our own division. For the benefits of this experience are not confined to the faculty alone; when the students see their content area teachers in the center, they begin to view writing as an interest and a skill of all disciplines--not just English. And this is our real objective.

4. DIAGNOSIS OF WRITING PROBLEMS

Many content area teachers do not refer students to the center because they require only one paper during the quarter; they do not realize a student's need for help until he has failed his only course paper. There are at least two solutions to this problem. One--asking the teacher to assign more writing--is beyond our control (although some strides in this direction have been made through our workshops). The second approach is far more manageable. We have designed what we call a writing skills chart as a more practical solution. It is a series of diagnostic tests, based on the subject matter of each major discipline, and composed of exercises plus a writing sample. Upon request, we administer a test for a certain content area during the first two weeks of class. We evaluate the papers and report to the instructor which students are most likely to have problems with the term paper. The instructor may use these recommendations as he feels most appropriate for the class. The most successful approach seems to be for him to talk with each student in a private conference, inform him of our recommendation, and encourage him to seek our assistance as he begins his research. Instructors have told us the less they present the Writing Center as punishment, the more successful they are at encouraging students to come regularly for assistance.

5. THE USE OF MODELS

Many content instructors believe a student should learn to write in English class and ever thereafter be able to write in any field or format. We have in our year's experience come to believe that this belief is based on a tragic misconception. We have worked with students who had very little trouble composing papers for English class, but experienced much difficulty in writing for history or sociology. This was a puzzling

contradiction, and we began to try to find an explanation. After working with these students over a long period of time, we theorized that they performed better on papers for English class because there they were provided with a model for their assignments, whereas, in the content classes they were seldom given a model. We knew that most English teachers discussed model paragraphs by professional writers and even distributed paragraphs and essays written by former students to show exactly what they expected their classes to write. On the other hand, few content area teachers provided such models for their classes, even though they required a variety of writing assignments: book reports, essay test responses, and survey analyses, for example.

We decided to try to construct models for content area writing ourselves. First, we talked with several teachers to learn what they expected from certain assignments, such as the book review in history class. Then we wrote a set of guidelines and designed a fill-in-the-blank model. These items were duplicated and kept on hand in the Writing Center for history students who came to us for assistance. A second approach was to work with a member of the sociology faculty to establish a weekly verbal skills lab for sociology students. Some sessions were conducted by a member of the reading faculty and others by the Writing Center staff. For our lesson on writing and analyzing a survey, we constructed a model as well as a series of guidelines for the students. The content-related guidelines and models in both of these instances helped the students to visualize the writing assignment they were being asked to generate.

6. RANGE OF STUDENT ABILITIES

We began the Writing Center as a place where post-developmental English students could receive extra help with writing as they entered their curricular areas. It is true that many of these students do seek the help of the center. However, we have found after a year of operation that many of our students are not post-developmental students. Many are in college-transfer courses and have never been considered by their instructors as particularly weak in English. Some come because they have been out of school for many years and want to brush up on their grammar. Some come for help with more sophisticated writing problems such as paraphrasing, documentation, or literary analysis. Others come because they lack confidence in their writing ability.

This wide range of students in the Writing Center has caused us to branch out more than we had originally planned. We have designed and gathered sets of exercises and guidelines at various levels so that we would be better able to serve students with different degrees of writing ability and experience. In this regard, one of our faculty tutors from last year has set up a weekly literature lab in the center for students in the college-transfer liberal arts sequence. This lab assists students who are having problems with analyzing literature, understanding literary terminology, and writing about literature. It is designed to meet an established need among a comparatively sophisticated group of student writers--those studying the content area of literature.

Another lab session we have established is for secretarial and clerical science students. Its purpose is to strengthen the proofreading skills of students in those areas. The students are required to complete a series of five units on proofreading as part of the requirements of their coursework.

Many of the students are not post-developmental students; however, as a whole they have demonstrated a need for concentrated practice in proofreading for such business-oriented tasks as typing, shorthand, and transcription. This new lab, if it is successful, will go on to become a model for other content area writing labs.

7. EVALUATION

Evaluation is the final problem we will discuss today. It has been a problem for us particularly because we are trying to judge the effectiveness of our center on student writing in content area classes. We have come to believe that a three-way system of evaluation is best for our purposes. At the end of each quarter, we poll three sources in an attempt to determine student progress--the Writing Center staff, the classroom teacher, and the student himself. The Writing Center staff's evaluation is incomplete in itself because it only shows progress of work done in the center. To assess the transfer of skills into the classroom, we must turn to the teacher. His assessment is based on degree of student improvement from the time he enters the Writing Center to the end of the quarter. There is one problem with faculty evaluation: How can he tell in all cases whether his student improved because of the Writing Center or because of help from the classroom teacher? This problem can be alleviated to some extent by the student evaluation; the student is the only one who sees both aspects of instruction. He is in the best position to judge the effect of the Writing Center assistance on his classroom improvement.

We are currently using all three methods of evaluation. Through our college's computerized AIDP tracking system, we will be able to correlate

the responses and, we hope, determine the most accurate method for evaluating student improvement. When it is in full operation, the tracking system will also help us to determine exactly what percentage of our students show improvement in their overall grade point average after attending the Writing Center regularly for a quarter.